

de-veining the mystery behind those unsightly streaks

DR JOHN TAN, A VASCULAR SURGEON AND SPECIALIST, ENLIGHTENS US WITH HIS EXPERTISE ON VARICOSE VEINS AND RELATED PROBLEMS

by Fiona Chen

Dr John Tan is brimming with enthusiasm despite the hour hand pointing slightly at past office hours. A consultant general and vascular surgeon at The Vein Clinic, he has been practicing medicine for more than 20 years and became a full-fledged blood vessel specialist 15 years ago.

His career went up a few notches in 1991 when he became a general surgeon, and he chose blood vessels as his subspecialty. When asked why, Dr Tan cited personal interest as a result of the blood vessel surgery being uncommon back then. He went on to add that as blood vessels treatment consists of two components,

he is able to deal with a variety of ailments, both aesthetic and medical problems such as dilated vessels, gangrene and visually unpleasing veins.

Ninety five per cent of his work revolves around veins, with 70 per cent of it being aesthetic and 25 per cent falling under the medical category. Preferring to work on the former as the patients are generally more appreciative of his work and he likes making them feel better about themselves.

Commonly referred to as veins on the leg, varicose veins also

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make its unwanted appearances on other parts of the body. Best described as enlarged blood vessels in the vein's wall, they are often painful occurrences especially when the patient is standing or walking.

Varicose veins occur when the leaflet valves in the veins fail to prevent blood from flowing backwards, caused by weakened valves which is the mechanism that retards the retrograde blood flow. The blood then pools around the veins, becoming engorged, especially after being subject to high pressure. Inheritance plays a significant part, says Dr Tan.

Apart from being aesthetically unsightly, the dangers associated with it are aplenty. Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT), more commonly known as Economy Class Syndrome, is a serious complication arising from varicose veins, which is fatal in about five per cent of the cases. Other less dire, but equally pressing conditions include inflamed tender veins, blood clotting and skin ulcerations. Varicose veins may also be a precursor to deeper vein problems, which may come to light only after thorough examinations with ultrasound technology. There may only be a few visible veins in the initial stages, which may increase over time, coupled with rising severity ranging from the entire leg being affected. Despite being considered benign, it can lead to major complications due to the poor circulation through the affected limb.

Varicose veins affect both genders, but more commonly in women. The hormone estrogen may place a role in their development because puberty and pregnancy often seem to bring on an onslaught of the ailment. During pregnancy, the enlarged uterus may also restrict blood flow contributing to their development.

The traditional treatment commonly used to treat varicose veins is vein stripping, a treatment which Dr Tan does not encourage. Apart from being unnecessarily evasive, the downtime is also a major disadvantage to the newer alternatives available at his clinic.

One of the methods he prefers is the Endovenous Laser Treatment, or EVLT. An alternative to surgical procedures for enlarged veins, it is done under local anesthesia and it works by way of heating the vein's interiors with a micro-sized laser fiber insertion into the affected vein, located with an ultrasound machine. The laser energy removes the fibre which eventually causes it to seal shut and fade away with time. The entire procedure is generally considered an outpatient service (no hospitalisation required and patients can resume work almost immediately), with minimal or zero downtime and virtually no scarring. The treatment can then be wrapped up with post-treatment such as sclerotherapy or ambulatory phlebectomy, to clear up any residual veins.

The abovementioned treatments are also used for removing smaller veins and spider veins, most obvious on the facial terrain. Dr Tan muses that even though it is a seemingly simple technique,

sclerotherapy is an extremely tricky one that requires years of expertise to master as it makes use of minute needles. In a nutshell, says Dr Tan, sclerotherapy seals off blood vessels when sclerosant is injected, causing the linings of the vein to swell, completing cutting off the blood flow. The results are almost instantaneous, taking only 15-20 minutes to see results.

When quizzed about the common misconception about treatment options of varicose and spider veins, Dr Tan is quick to point out that the general public is often clueless about available options, often mistaking Intense Pulsed Light (IPL) as a cure-all.

"The truth is, IPL is not a guarantee, as it is only more suitable for harder-to-reach and extremely fine veins which the needle is unable to reach. I think more education is needed to prompt the public that varicose veins are not incurable, that they don't have to live with the pain or eyesores associated with it."

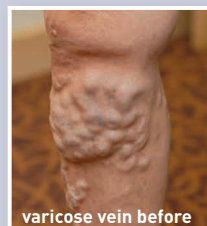
Dr Tan's quick guide to varicose prevention and symptoms:

Common symptoms

- Swollen Ankles
- Tied legs
- Pain and aches after prolonged standing
- Cramps at night
- Bulgy and ugly veins or spider veins
- Darkening skin and non-healing ulcer at the ankle

Prevention

- Don't cross your legs! It increases pressure on leg veins and causes upward flow of blood to be slower than usual.
- High heels should be avoided when necessary as they cause your lower legs to be strained.
- A simple exercise to follow when you're lying down: Raise your legs horizontally for a few seconds before resting it. Repeat. This relieves the lower legs, and lessens the work of the valves.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes whenever possible. Constricting items such as tight-fitting jeans with a small waistband is a no-no.



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